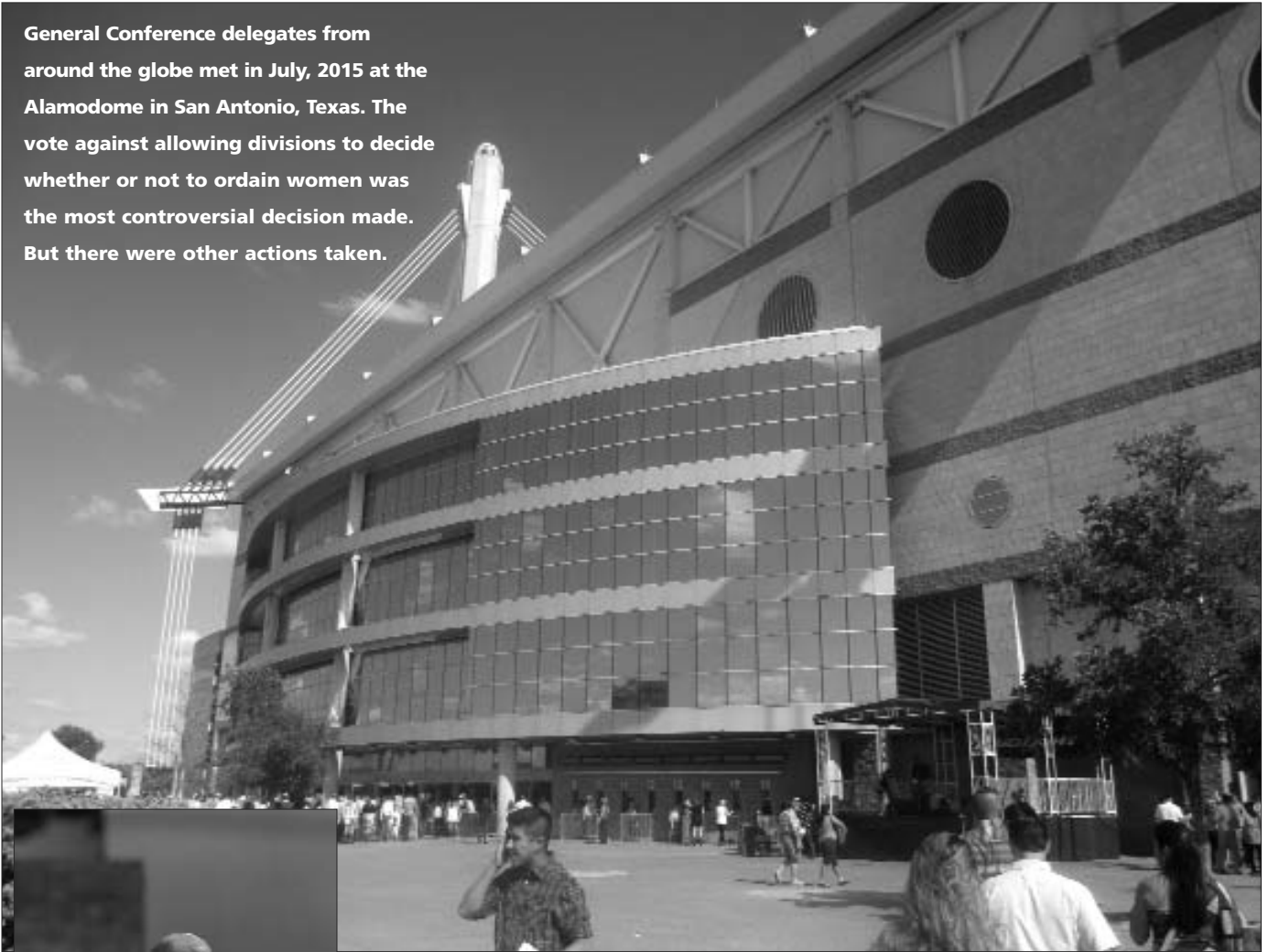


After SAN ANTONIO

BILLY HATHORN

General Conference delegates from around the globe met in July, 2015 at the Alamodome in San Antonio, Texas. The vote against allowing divisions to decide whether or not to ordain women was the most controversial decision made. But there were other actions taken.



Ted N.C. Wilson, the newly elected 20th president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is joined by his wife, Nancy Wilson, as they are presented to the delegates at the 60th General Conference Session.

JAMES BOKOVY/NAD COMMUNICATION

San Antonio and the *Church Manual* | BY JOHN BRUNT

In the article I wrote before the General Conference Session on proposed changes to the *Church Manual*, I questioned whether they would be a matter for discussion or merely a rubber stamp, especially in light of the seemingly more significant items on women's ordination and Fundamental Beliefs. If anyone thought that *Church Manual* issues would be rubber-stamped, they were in for a huge surprise. About two and a half days were devoted to the *Church Manual*, and even then delegates never got to all of the proposed items.

First *Church Manual* Session

The direction of the discussions was set right at the beginning when the fifth business meeting, on the morning of Sunday, July 5, took up the first *Church Manual* issues in a session chaired by Geoffrey Mbwana. *Church Manual* chair, Armando Miranda, and secretary, Harald Wollan, presented a total of five items during that first session. These all seemed like fairly simple items, but the delegates referred all but one of them back to the committee. In the first half-day they approved only one item!

The first item seemed simple enough. It stated that the *Church Manual* speaks primarily to the local church and the *Working Policy* to the wider organization. Delegates Jay Gallimore and Mario Veloso immediately objected that this introduced a dangerous dichotomy. Others joined in and the proposed change was referred back.

The second issue was a change in the appeal process when organizations within the church structure have a dispute. At present the appeal can continue right to the General Conference; the new proposal would limit the appeal process



President Wilson addresses the crowd at the Alamodome on Sabbath, July 11

to the highest organization not involved in the dispute, and that decision would be final. Again, there were immediate and serious objections. Most focused on the need to allow appeals to go all the way to the General Conference if they were not settled at a lower level, and felt that any limiting of the appeal process would be unfair. Again, the proposal was referred back.

The third proposal of the first morning called for using the term "pastor" throughout the *Church Manual*. The present wording is sometimes "pastor" and sometimes "minister." At this point it became evident that no discussion could ignore the women's ordination issue that was to come three days later. Opponents of women's ordination saw this as an entry to woman pastors and objected. Others admonished the chair not to allow commercials about opposition to women's ordination to creep into a discussion that had nothing to do with it. But opponents continued to worry that this change might open the door to women in the office of pastor (even though, as delegate Elizabeth Talbot pointed

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out, we opened that door long ago by agreeing to the commissioning of women pastors.) Finally Doug Batchelor moved that the item be referred back to the committee, and it was. Three up and three down!

The fourth proposal addressed who may speak in Adventist church services. The current *Church Manual* allows only credentialed individuals to speak. Yet many local elders speak who do not have credentials. Therefore new wording was proposed that stated: "No one should be allowed to speak to any congregation unless he/she has been invited by the church in harmony with guidelines given by the conference." After some brief and minor objections, this proposal passed. The first actual change to be made in the *Church Manual* after almost two hours of discussion!

Progress was short-lived, however. The next item was also referred back to the committee. It involved reasons for church discipline, expanding the reasons by adding the words:

Violation of the commandment of the law of God, which reads, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14, Matt. 5:28), as it relates to the marriage institution and the Christian home, biblical standards of moral conduct, and any act of sexual intimacy outside of a marriage relationship and/or non-consensual acts of sexual conduct within a marriage whether those acts are legal or illegal. Such acts include but are not limited to child sexual abuse, including abuse of the vulnerable. Marriage is defined as a public, lawfully binding, monogamous, heterosexual relationship between one man and one woman.

Jeroen Tuinstra, a conference president in the Inter-European Division, offered an amendment to omit the words "and any act of sexual intimacy outside of a marriage relationship". This amendment was quickly defeated, but another issue was raised by Dan Jackson. He suggested that the term "legally binding" might become problematic in the future, as laws redefine marriage. On that basis the motion was referred back to the committee.

This was the first of five sessions on the *Church Manual*. Within the scope of this article we cannot go into this much detail for each of the five sessions, but will try to summarize high points and major issues.

Second *Church Manual* Session

The sixth business session, which began at 2:00 p.m. that same day, began with an easy one. The proposal changed only one word relating to church discipline. The word

"remove" had been used in a section referring to church discipline, but since censure is also an option in discipline, the work was changed to "discipline." Finally, an easy pass.

Two other issues dominated the remainder of this second session on the *Church Manual*: membership issues and who may conduct communion services.

The most significant proposed change in church membership had to do with those who choose to resign their membership. At present, if a member wishes to resign from church membership their request must be voted by a church business meeting and is recorded as being dropped for apostasy. The new proposal would allow the church board to receive the letter and simply record it, adding that efforts should be made to restore the individual.

This new proposal was voted after several minor changes were made by common consent, and after a good bit of discussion. Some were concerned that members would use this to avoid church discipline. Others wondered what this meant for those who resigned and later wanted to return. Would they come in by baptism or profession of faith? Some were concerned that if there was no discipline, and the person who resigned later wanted to join a different local church, the second church wouldn't know what the person had done. Even though the proposal passed, it was surprising to see how important it was for some delegates who spoke to assure that a pound of flesh be extracted from erring members before they could resign on their own.

Also with regard to membership, currently a business meeting can specify a period of time before a person can be reinstated after discipline, but the new proposal simply leaves the time open to a point where there is confession and evidence of change. This proposal also passed, but only after a long discussion.

The coming vote on women's ordination came back into the forefront when a seemingly simple proposal to allow ordained and commissioned pastors and local ordained elders, but not ordained deacons and deaconesses, to lead out in the communion. Those who opposed not only women's ordination, but also women as pastors, seized on this as an opportunity to try and roll back already-voted privileges allowed to commissioned pastors. An amendment was made to remove commissioned pastors from those who could lead out, but it was defeated, and the proposal was voted. It was obvious, however, that Wednesday was already in the room.

Third *Church Manual* Session

Discussion on *Church Manual* proposals had to wait two more days to allow for the discussion of changes in the Fundamental Beliefs, but Tuesday afternoon the *Church Manual* took center stage again. This session was amazingly restrained compared to the first two sessions, which were noteworthy for their vigorous discussions. For the first time a number of proposals were voted without any discussion at all. Perhaps being sandwiched between Tuesday morning's discussion on Fundamental Beliefs and Wednesday's discussion of women's ordination made *Church Manual* proposals appear less vital.

Changes voted included sections on the function and training of deacons and deaconesses, giving receipts to members, nomenclature for the community services or Dorcas ministries, the procedure for objecting to local nominating committee reports, and the role of the finance committee. But proposals on youth ministries, unauthorized speakers in the church, and the communion service were referred back to the committee.

Fourth *Church Manual* Session

Several of the items referred back to the committee at earlier sessions came back to the floor on Friday morning. The item from the first session, on the relationship between the *Church Manual* and *Working Policy*, came back with no change and was voted without discussion.

The second issue referred back in the first session—that of appeals when organizations have disputes—came back with a slight change. It specified that appeals could be made to one higher organization than the first proposal, but the organization could decide whether to hear the appeal or not. Several delegates objected that this limitation was unfair; there should be no denial of the right to appeal all the way to the General Conference. Delegate Roscoe Howard noted that in the U.S. appeal process, the Supreme Court is able to choose which appeals it hears.

A motion was made to refer this matter

back to the committee again. The motion was defeated, although the vote was so close that someone called for an actual count. The motion to refer lost 510–647. (Notice that by Friday morning fewer than half of the 2,566 delegates were present and voting.) After more discussion, the main motion to accept the proposed wording passed.

The next item was the proposal for using the term “pastor” consistently throughout the *Church Manual*. It had also been referred back on Sunday, but now passed. A few proposed changes in the role of the church board received several additional suggestions, but a motion to refer it back lost and the proposal was voted.

The last item taken up Friday morning related to campus ministries. Delegates voted some minor wording changes, such as changing the term “public colleges” to “colleges or universities not operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

As time for lunch passed, the chair gave delegates the choice—stay another half hour and finish, or come back in the afternoon for a fifth session on the *Church Manual*. Hungry delegates decided to go have lunch and come back.

Fifth and Last *Church Manual* Session

This session was nothing less than bizarre. Somehow Alamodome staff got the idea that there was no afternoon session, and many delegates coming to the meeting were turned away. Given the long distance from the Dome to the hotels it was impossible to get the word out that the delegates were to return and meet. As a result very few delegates were on the floor. The chair ruled that, due to the lack of delegates, contentious proposals that had been referred back to the committee would not be addressed, and in these areas the *Church Manual* would remain in its present form for another five years.

The proposed changes on youth ministries that had been referred in the third session were voted, and some changes were made to the sections on church discipline and marriage. Under reasons for discipline the following statement was added:

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Fornication, which includes among other issues, promiscuity, homosexual activity, incest, sodomy, and bestiality.

In addition, the last reason for discipline saw a change in wording designed to rule out the use of marijuana in localities where it is legal. The underlined portions are new, and the sections with a line through them are deleted from the previous *Church Manual*.

The use or manufacture of illicit drugs or the use, misuse, or sale of narcotics or drugs without appropriate medical cause and license. ~~misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs.~~

The statement on marriage was changed as follows:

Marriage, thus instituted by God, is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship between one male and one female. ~~Marriage is a lifelong commitment of husband and wife.~~ As such, marriage is a public, lawfully binding lifelong commitment of a man and a woman to each other and between the couple and God...

This session

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than bizarre.

Statements on communion and unauthorized speakers in churches were not brought back to the floor, and in these areas the *Church Manual* will remain as is until 2020, when they are taken again in Indianapolis.

At the end of the session, delegate Larry Geraty rose to make a comment, stating that while he agreed with most of what had been voted, his heart was heavy as he sensed a lack of compassion for people “whom God has created, many of them the way they are.” He was cut off by the chair, who ruled that since there was no motion on the floor to address he was out of order.

Concluding Reflections

The overall direction of the changes made is mixed. Many were fairly insignificant changes in wording and details. Some were clearly improvements, such as allowing members to resign membership without having to take the

request to the church business meeting. Many, however, seemed to reflect a desire to tighten and restrict membership.

When one considers the amount of time devoted to the discussion of the *Church Manual* in San Antonio, the apparent lack of genuine practical significance in many of the items that were changed, and lack of seriousness with which the *Church Manual* is taken, at least in my part of the world, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that much time was wasted in this process. One might be tempted to see this as evidence that what began as a movement has become a bureaucracy. Bringing two-and-half-thousand people together from all over the world to haggle about issues of wording in a manual that have very little effect on the real world, hardly seems to make sense. It could lead to discouragement about the church.

Fortunately, arguments about the wording of the *Church Manual* do not represent what the church is all about. Even though there is no doubt that church structure and organization aid in the mission of the church and are important, the church is about vital, dynamic, flourishing communities at the local level where members experience God's grace through fellowship, study and worship, and then give their energies to mission at home and around the world.

As part of one of those communities I conclude with a confession. Recently at a church board meeting someone asked what the *Church Manual* said about a certain issue. A search of the premises could not locate a *Church Manual*. ■

John Brunt is the recently-retired senior pastor of the Azure Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church in Grand Terrace, California. He taught in the School of Theology at Walla Walla University



for 19 years and was the Vice President of Academic Administration for 12 years. He and his wife, Lone, have two grown children and three grandsons.

How the Adventist Church Changed its Fundamental Beliefs in San Antonio

BY LARRY GERATY

The current statement of *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists* was adopted for the first time by the 1980 General Conference Session in Dallas. Other than adding an additional statement to satisfy a “third world” need several years ago (Belief 11, “Growing in Christ”), 2015 was the first time this 35-year-old Statement had been revised (as provided for in the original Preamble). Work on this Fundamental Beliefs statement zeroed in on the nuances of specific words on Monday, July 6, 2015, at San Antonio’s Alamodome where General Conference delegates gathered for their fourth day of business sessions.

The conversation began with the matter of how many votes would be needed to pass changes in the beliefs—a “simple” majority, or two-thirds. A delegate had requested on the first day of meetings that, given the importance of the Fundamental Beliefs, any changes be treated like changes to the constitution and bylaws that require a two-thirds majority vote to alter.

President Ted Wilson told the group that the Steering Committee had considered the request, but decided not to move away from the simple majority vote. He said, “It is not our intention that the fundamental beliefs be changed with a close vote, but a consensus vote. We recommend that we do not insert into the rules order a requirement for a two-thirds vote.” He appealed to the delegates to “Calm our hearts so we do not get caught up in parliamentary process and block the progress of our work.” After some discussion, the delegates voted to accept the recommendation of the Steering Committee to

remain with a simple majority.

Drafting Committee members Artur Steele, Bill Knott, and Angel Rodriguez were introduced and on the platform ready to answer questions. Though not present, it was mentioned that Gerhard Pfandl had also been a part of the working group. (Unlike the members of the original Drafting and Review Committees in 1980 which included a number of the denomination’s top scholars and professors, the 2015 committee was made up exclusively of General Conference employees, the two primary theologians being with the GC Biblical Research Institute). Steele, capable chair of the committee and a GC vice-president, led the way through the Fundamental Beliefs documents. He said the committee had been given a specific task—first, to review all the beliefs to make sure that the language is clear and distinct, and secondly, to find a way to integrate the language of the “Affirmation of Creation” document approved by the 2005 General Conference, into Belief 6 on “Creation” and Belief 8 on “The Great Controversy” (the most suitable place for mentioning a global flood). He emphasized that there were no recommendations to change what we believe. Rather the effort was directed at making the Beliefs clear, given the changes that occur over time in the understanding of words and phrases. It soon became apparent, however, that though the preamble states Adventists “accept the Bible as their only creed,” Ellen White and “tradition” were also sources of authority in terms of the revised Fundamental Beliefs.

Slight revisions to a few Beliefs were first quickly voted because their only changes were

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putting the biblical references in canonical order: the preamble and Beliefs 13, “The Remnant and Its Mission”; 14, “Unity in the Body of Christ”; 15, “Baptism”; 16, “The Lord’s Supper”; 26, “Death and Resurrection”; 27, “The Millennium and the End of Sin”; and 28, “The New Earth”. Other simple changes to Beliefs 25, “The Second Coming of Christ”; 20, “The Sabbath”; 11, “Growing in Christ”; and 9, “The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ”, were voted.

Throughout the entire statement of Fundamental Beliefs a change to gender neutral language was achieved, mostly without controversy, except in a few specific beliefs.

The word “apostolic” in Belief 17, “Spiritual Gifts and Ministries”, sparked extended discussion. Since it could be misunderstood without more clear definition, the committee said in its recommendation that it be removed from the sentence: “Some members are called of God and endowed by the Spirit for functions recognized by the church in pastoral, evangelistic, apostolic, and teaching ministries particularly needed to equip the members for service, to build up the church to spiritual maturity, and to foster unity of the faith and knowledge of God.” There were suggestions for alternative words such as cross-cultural, and pleadings to leave the word in place. Eventually the vote to refer this Belief back to the Drafting Committee for reconsideration was defeated and “apostolic” removed from the Belief that was then approved.

Belief 21, “Stewardship”, was voted without extended discussion. A delegate then suggested that discussion move to Beliefs 6, “Creation”, and 8, “The Great Controversy”, which everyone was waiting for, but Artur Stele demurred, not wanting “to destroy the good movement that was occurring.”

Belief 22, “Christian Behavior”, was easily voted.

Proposed changes to Belief 23, “Marriage and the Family”, brought defenders of the gay community to the microphone, because the proposed changes included removing the word “partners”, given its current connotation with gay

marriage. In the midst of the conversation, President Ted Wilson went to the microphone and said in an authoritative tone, “We want to leave no ambiguity about marriage”. His comment received thunderous applause. All proposals to alter the proposed changes then met with defeat and the revised Belief was voted as is.

Finally, Belief 6, “Creation” was introduced. Not long into the discussion, Arthur Stele said the Committee knew that it would need to review this item, and Belief 8, “The Great Controversy”, so rather than going through vote after vote on parliamentary procedures, the comments from the delegates should simply address what the committee should review. Suggestions included (from the Seminary) whether to use the creation language of Genesis or Exodus in Belief 6, and (from Geoscience) to substitute “global” for “worldwide” in Belief 8. But most of the extended discussion centered on the fundamental words: “recent” (in terms of time), “literal” (in terms of days), and “historical” (in terms of account). Because of the Committee’s mandate, it was clear that even though these words do not appear in Scripture and are clearly debatable based on increasingly well-known evidence, because they are used by Ellen White, they had to be in the statement in order to “exclude any possibility of the concept of evolution creeping in to the church.”

Monday afternoon, the only sticking point in Belief 24, “Christ’s Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary”, was the use of the word “symbolized” in the phrase: Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary “was symbolized by the work of the high priest in the holy place.” Some preferred a word like “typified”, which was referred to the review committee. Perhaps it is worth noting that this relatively brief discussion was in contrast to the 1980 GC Session in Dallas where this particular Belief was debated at length and was the last Belief to be adopted (on the last Friday of the session).

Belief 19, “The Law of God”, was easily approved. There followed some controversy over Belief 12, “The Church”. As revised, it reads

in part, "The church derives its authority from Christ who is the incarnate Word revealed in the Scriptures." Several South American delegates, wanting to distance themselves from Catholicism, argued for a dual source of authority—Scripture and Christ—but current GC officials expressed the view that Christ is the only authority, and their view prevailed.

Belief 10, "The Experience of Salvation"; Belief 2, "The Trinity"; and Belief 3, "The Father", were easily voted. Not so Belief 4, "The Son". The issue raised by several delegates was the phrase "became also truly human, Jesus the Christ," where it had originally been "truly man." The review committee argued in response that the issue was the incarnation, not gender, so the referral lost and the proposed belief was voted.

Belief 7, "The Nature of Humanity", and Belief 5, "The Holy Spirit", were adopted as presented. Belief 18, "The Gift of Prophecy", provoked quite a debate about Ellen White's relation to the Bible. For instance, Cliff Goldstein spoke strongly in support of the wording, while Ray Roenfeldt felt Ellen White herself would be "scandalized" by the wording. Several spoke in favor of referring the statement back to the committee so it could be strengthened. Some wanted to add "truth" into the statement: "Her writings speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church." A delegate questioned the "canonization" of Ellen White, but the delegates voted the Belief as presented.

With Belief 1, "The Holy Scriptures", being the last one to be considered, and yet, in some ways, the most important, Artur Stele suggested referring it back for review, presumably so as not to prolong discussion on such issues as whether to include the word "final" in the proposed addition, "The Holy Scriptures are the final, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will."

By the end of Monday, during sessions ably chaired by Vice Presidents Ben Schoun and Lowell Cooper, all Beliefs were voted as presented except for four: Beliefs 1, 6, 8, and 24. Comments and concerns about them were to be

reviewed by the Drafting Committee overnight and brought back to the delegates for disposition on Tuesday morning.

Tuesday's chair was Vice President Ella Simmons, who endeavored to handle business carefully and compassionately. In many ways, she had the most difficult chairing task of all, but throughout the morning several delegates complimented her on the way she conducted business; she deferred to the Spirit's guidance. "Right off the bat" Tuesday morning, various delegates had general suggestions. One was the importance of modern language for the Beliefs so they could be better understood, including by youth. Another was an appeal to leadership, that they really listen to the body of delegates, even though they seemed determined to stick to what they had already written. Artur Stele then reported on the "hard work" overnight of the Drafting Committee, indicating that they would proceed from "the easiest to the hardest".

On Belief 24, "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary", the committee accepted the previous day's suggestion to incorporate "typified" instead of "symbolized". This provoked many objections to "typify," as old English and hard to translate, but the body voted the new word and passed the Belief as presented.

On Belief 8, "The Great Controversy", the Drafting Committee accepted Geoscience's recommendation that "global" replace "worldwide" for the extent of the flood, even though the notion of "global" is not biblical and was unknown until modern times. A young delegate asked if there had been consideration of eliminating the sentence which had been added by the committee, "as presented in the historical account of Genesis 1–11." Stele said yes, but the decision was to keep it in. The delegates duly voted the Belief as presented.

On Belief 1, "The Holy Scriptures", Artur Stele reported that they wanted to strengthen the statement, so looked for a word other than "final" that would not have chronological implications. The word "supreme" was chosen; the Belief thus reading "the Holy Scriptures are the

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supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will." Many other words were suggested, such as "normative" and "ultimate." Roger Robertsen from the Israel Mission was the first to speak. He reminded the delegates that the preamble speaks of the Bible being our "only creed," so suggested that to strengthen the "sola scriptura" concept, the following statement should read, the Scriptures are "the sole revealer of doctrine." Artur Stele's rejoinder was, "there are many words and this is the one that came up!" Gerard Damteegt again objected to inclusive language, being sure that no females were involved in writing the Bible. There followed quite an involved discussion as to the meaning and use of the Greek word "anthropos" (man, human) and how it should be translated. It appeared at times that some delegates enjoyed showing off their knowledge of New Testament Greek. There was also a debate over the term "author" vs. "writer", which one delegate tried to settle with Ellen White's well-known statement in *1 Selected Messages* 25, that "God is author, but writers are human." He was countered by Ellen White's own statement that her writings are not to be used to settle arguments! Ultimately, Belief 1 was voted as presented.

That left to the last Belief 6, "Creation". Angel Rodriguez said the committee knew the wording for this Belief was controversial but their work proceeded on the following basis: first, they decided not to use ambiguous words that would allow evolutionary thinking. Second, the word "recent" was necessary to combat the notion of "deep time"; the biblical genealogies place creation not that long ago, even though we know they are incomplete. Third, "Seventh-day Adventists assume the history of our planet began in Genesis 1," so a literal reading of Genesis is necessary, and seven literal days has to be a part of the statement. The word "historical" was thus voted, even though the fact that God is the subject of every sentence in Genesis 1 means that "theological" would have been a more accurate and helpful word. Bill Knott, a member of the Drafting Committee, said how proud he was to be an Adventist as he watched the process, including the "year of listening" by the committee. After a review of the statement the evening before, a "clean copy" of the Belief was put up on the screen; Artur Stele then moved Belief 6 as amended.

At that point President Ted Wilson came out to speak: "Essentially this version of the Belief was brought to the floor at the 2005 GC Session. I personally endorse it. This

wording will help us in our work. You can put a spin on any word, such as 'recent,' but it means 'not old.' There is no room for theistic evolution. I will tell you I personally believe, based on the Spirit of Prophecy, that the earth is approximately 6,000 years old." From then on, all speeches were either supportive of the Belief as presented, or wanted to strengthen it further. Typical was Cliff Goldstein's comment: "This issue didn't arise in a vacuum. We are purposely doing this to exclude evolution." There followed a bit of discussion about whether the entire universe is 6,000 years old but the consensus was that the wording presented was adequate for the church. An African delegate admitted he was now relieved. "It is now time to trust the Holy Spirit and the scholars who have worked on this. My children will be safe. I call question on the motion." Belief 6 was voted as presented. Artur Stele assured the assembled delegates: "None of what we voted has changed what we have always believed."

That is what happened with the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs on Monday and Tuesday. This author tried unsuccessfully to participate in the process, but the outcome was predetermined. Good people, able people, were involved but no meaningful discussion of the issues could take place in two-minute segments. As a result, the statement of *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists* looks increasingly like the work of a committee rather than a convincing literary masterpiece. It's hard for several hundred delegates to make a positive difference in two days. Maybe the hopes of delegates to improve the wording of their beloved beliefs was unrealistic from the start. Certainly the administration of the General Conference got what it wanted. The question now is how will they use what they have crafted? Will it be "descriptive," which would be an appropriate use, or "prescriptive," which could prove to be disastrous—both to the concept of "present truth" and to denominational employment. Will the words of our pioneer, John Loughborough, quoted on the floor, be prophetic? A guiding hand was evident throughout; let's hope it was the Holy Spirit's. ■

Larry Geraty is President Emeritus of La Sierra University and was a delegate at the 60th General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas.



The Time Has Come | BY LOTHAR TRÄDER

Every fast growing organization will have to face the question of whether its structure is still befitting of its mission. Churches are no exception to this rule. The Seventh-day Adventist church, for several decades, has oscillated between two forms of governance: centralism and/or federalism. As a church historian I have attentively observed that development.

In 1995 in Utrecht, Robert Folkenberg played the centralist card when he was elected “first officer”, not “primus inter pares” (first among equals). The church had presumably learned lessons from recent controversies due to differing views on doctrine, and didn’t want to face another Glacier View, as in the case of Desmond Ford. The tendency of the motion of Robert Folkenberg was a clear shift towards centralism. There was not yet a pope in sight, only some shady contours. That is why resistance within the General Conference administration was substantial. I still remember the long queue at the microphones. In vain, the motion was voted.

At the same GC Session an opposing motion was put forward: the North American Division’s motion to ordain women. The motion was to leave it to the divisions to decide upon the matter; it was voted down. That was clearly a motion aiming for federalism. So two clearly opposing motions were being put forth at that session.

Every observer could see the problem that had arisen. So the GC, over the next few years, initiated several commissions to study this problem. For instance, at the 2004 year-end meeting a commission was organized to study steps

towards an administrative restructuring of the church. They were asked to present their findings only six months later. Obviously the church was in haste. In autumn 2005 a permanent commission was initiated. Jan Paulsen’s reason for this group was the rapid growth of the church. As he said: “there must be a better, more effective and efficient way of doing church.”

In that context we immediately hear a word that rings alarm bells for administrators (the NAD’s motion in 1995 was indeed aiming for self-determination): congregationalism. Why is that term so controversial? The original meaning of the word congregationalism is the deconstruction of an existing structure, in this case the dissolution of a worldwide Adventist Church, shifting competences towards the local church. This can hardly be a solution for our church, but something has to happen, and that quickly. San Antonio doesn’t leave us with any other conclusion. We can’t allow cultural majorities to determine theological and structural questions.

Our *Church Manual* lists different forms of church government and decides for what we call a representative form of church constitution. But it is exactly that governance which is faced with its own limitations. Just by sheer quantity, delegates of certain regions can block any motion just because it doesn’t suit their theological convictions or cultural habits. Other regions have to acquiesce, even if their cultural environment is different. The vote on the motion to make women’s ordination regional has shown that clearly.

So what can we learn from church history? In Germany we have two dominant churches: the

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erosion.**

Roman-Catholic and the Lutheran Church. Both have completely different forms of governance. The Roman-Catholic church champions a centralist structure with a pope in Rome, while the Lutheran Church (or better, churches) favors a federalist solution. The different federal churches (*Landeskirche*) are rallied together under the roof of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD), with a president. The regional churches owe their existence to Luther. He determined the principalities of the different regions to be the administrative heads of the church, since for protestant churches there was no longer a pope. But as the sovereigns lost power, something had to be done. So every regional church has its own structure; sometimes headed by a bishop (e.g. Berlin-Brandenburg), sometimes a so-called president (e.g. Hessen-Nassau). These regional churches determine many of their questions independently. Their superstructure (EKD) provides the needed unity for public relations.

Both structures of church governance have proven reliable. Both churches have millions of members and could serve as an example for us. But we will have to decide soon, for the current situation is unbearable. The “representative” model is outdated, because it is not applicable to our church. It did serve us well in the first phase of our history, but the number of delegates alone will get us into trouble. Where will we find suitable venues to host business sessions for delegates if we don’t want to radically reduce their number? July’s vote on women’s ordination has shown that it is irresponsible to allow one cultural group to enforce their views on another group that holds different cultural convictions, just by the weight of their numbers. We can’t as yet see the damage that has been done by that vote. As of today, four days after the vote, I have received the first reports of requests for the removal of membership. These people tell me: “The church of San Antonio is not my church anymore!” And we are not talking about frustrated female pastors.

So what should we do? Could church history help us? What we do not want is another pope, that is clear, but the delegate structure has reached its limits. I would suggest an Adventist version of congregationalism: “unionism”. Union = to unite, or more clearly: union = alliance, bond (esp. of states or churches with similar confessions). And that is exactly what is meant. We should aim at building relatively independent regional churches: an Adventist Church in Europe, an Adventist Church in North-America, South-

America, Africa, etc. This world alliance could replace the now existing General Conference. What competence this world alliance or the regional Churches could or should have, should be left to experts. I just want to insert a practical solution from church history into the overdue discussion.

Now is the time: the *kairos* of Texas is a real chance. Let us not stay deaf to the wake-up call of history. If we tarry any longer, we will have to face schism (another lesson from church history). If, for example, the already existing resolutions on women’s ordination in several fields continue to be implemented (and there is no reason to doubt that that will be the case), then the organizational structure of our church will fail. That is exactly what my model would prevent. We have to change our form of organization; and in order to avoid the contentious term congregationalism, I have decided to speak of “unionism”. A continental (regional) church could make intelligent decisions on its own, not only as far as ordination is concerned. Our “Adventist Church in Europe”, for example, could determine its own week-of-prayer edition, still championing the world-theme, but adapted to our cultural needs. The same applies to quotations and didactical questions of the Sabbath school quarterly.

The last day of business sessions in San Antonio saw just that kind of change to the *Church Manual*. Divisions were given the possibility to determine questions on their own without having to refer them on to the General Conference. This could be a first step. I appeal to all leaders of divisions and administrations, to initiate a bold structural change. If we don’t succeed in adapting our structure to accommodate healthy growth, we will soon witness qualitative and quantitative erosion. This kind of exodus has already begun in Europe and will be visible in the United States shortly. The more cultural difference manifests itself one-sidedly, the more minority groups will shrink in number. It is high time to initiate concrete steps. Whoever wants to keep our church from serious damage, has to act. Now! ■

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What Happens Next? | BY MITCHELL TYNER

Note: The author of the following article was asked by *Spectrum* to address only the legal and enforcement aspects of the San Antonio decision about ordination of women. For discussion of the historical, theological, ethical and moral implications, see previously published articles by Gary Patterson and Gary Chudley.

Since the vote of the General Conference Session in San Antonio to deny the divisions the right to make their own decisions as to the ordination of women to the ministry, vast verbiage has been expended, some extolling the propriety of the decision, and much bemoaning its negative impact on the most developed parts of the world. One question that has seemed to come from both camps is a simple one: What will come next?

The answer was not long coming. On August 17, the General Conference Secretariat released a paper entitled "Unions and Ordination to the Gospel Ministry," in which it argued that the unions have only delegated and limited power in the area of ordination, and that denominational policy does not permit women to be ordained. Others have argued that specific policies clearly state the contrary. So who's correct?

Before answering that question, let's wade through some language from the General Conference *Working Policy*, 2014–15 edition. None of the sections quoted below were revised by the recent session.

B 15 05 Authoritative Administrative Voice of the Church – The General Conference *Working Policy* contains the Constitution and Bylaws of

the General Conference, the Mission Statement and the accumulated or revised policies adopted by the General Conference Session and Annual Councils of the General Conference Executive Committee. *It is, therefore, the authoritative voice of the church in all matters pertaining to the mission and to the administration of the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in all parts of the world.* (Emphasis supplied, as below)

B 05 Organizational and Operational Principles of Seventh-day Adventist Church Structure.

3. Organizational status is granted to a *constituency* as a trust... not self-generated, automatic or perpetual.
5. The *highest level of authority* within the powers granted to each level of denominational organization resides in the *constituency meeting*.
6. Different elements of organizational authority and responsibility are distributed among the various levels of denominational organization. For example, the decision as to who may/may not be a member of a local Seventh-day Adventist Church is entrusted to the members of the local church concerned, decisions as to the employment of local church pastors is entrusted to the local conference/mission; decisions regarding the *ordination of ministers is entrusted to the union conference*... Thus *each level of organization exercises a realm of final authority and responsibility* that may have implications for other levels of organization.
8. . . .The Church Manual and the General Conference Working Policy present the collective voice of Seventh-day Adventists regarding beliefs, denominational structure, relationships and operational procedures.

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B 50 05 Lines of Responsibility.

2. Union Conferences/Missions – Union Conferences/missions are responsible to the respective *division* section of which they are a part, and are administered in harmony with the operating policies of the General Conference and of the division.

L 45 Procedure in Authorizing Ordination.

3. After favorable consideration the local conference committee will submit the name of the candidate with its findings and convictions to the union for counsel and approval.
4. The division and institutional boards will submit names recommended for ordination to the division committee. The General Conference and its institutional boards will submit names to the General Conference Executive Committee.

Next, some principles of interpretation of authoritative documents.

1. Legislative bodies, and the writers they employ, are assumed to have the competence to say what they mean and mean what they say. Intent should be considered only where necessary, as when seeking to harmonize conflicting provisions from an authoritative document of equal applicability.
2. The plain meaning of the words has a rebuttable presumption of accuracy. Any alternate meaning should be shown by a clear history of such usage in other authoritative documents from the same source.
3. Prohibitions are not to be assumed. This is the difference between a totalitarian society and a free one. In the former, all is forbidden except that which is expressly allowed. In the latter, all is allowed except that which is expressly forbidden. The burden must always be on the party seeking to restrain action, not on the party proposing to act.
4. Expressions of restraint are to be construed narrowly against the restraining power. If the provision in question does not accurately describe the actions in question, there is no violation.

Now, to apply the principles to the above cited policies.

We have seen that: (1) The *Working Policy* and *Church Manual* are the authoritative documents; (2) Subject to those documents, each level of church structure exercises a

realm of final authority in those areas delegated to it; (3) The union is delegated the responsibility for decisions as to ordination of ministerial candidates; and (4) The ultimate authority at each level is the constituency of that organization. Applying our principles of interpretation, we thus find that the denomination's authoritative documents do not forbid unions to ordain women to the ministry. No plain statement of any such prohibition can be shown.

Still, the General Conference Secretariat disagrees. It argues that the policy sections quoted above don't mean what they appear to say, but rather what the General Conference administration says they say. The church has executive and administrative arms at all levels, but it has no designated judiciary, and in this vacuum, administration assumes the right to interpret without review or appeal. In essence, it argues that 'policy means what we say it means.' If that's true, we need to reexamine the absence of a designated judiciary function.

A judiciary function exists to clarify the meaning of authoritative documents, and to serve as a check on the executive and legislative powers of an organization. The absence of a judiciary function is a telling indicator of the difference between a governmental model of governance, which always has such a function, and a corporate model, where that function is usurped by the executive. Having grown into the equivalent of a multi-cultural society, whether the denomination is better served by a corporate or governmental model is an open question that deserves more attention.

The Secretariat document argues that *Working Policy* B 05 does not mean what it says, which is that the final authority as to ordination candidates is a matter for the union to decide. It argues that the examples given are just that—examples, not policy statements. Oddly, it doesn't reject the other examples in that section, such as the local congregation having final say as to who may or may not become or remain a member. Many can cite examples, such as Desmond Ford, of members who the General Conference would have preferred to be disfellowshipped, but where the General Conference ultimately respected the authority of the congregation of which he was a member to make that decision, rather than attempt to force the issue. When examples are given in an authoritative document, it may be assumed that they are equally valid. Evidence of respect shown, especially unwilling respect, for one example in such a list should

be taken as evidence of the propriety and equally binding nature of the entire list.

Another such example flows from *Working Policy* L 45 05, cited above. This policy says that ordination candidates from conferences and unions will be approved by the union committee, candidates employed by a division or its institutions will be approved by the division committee, and candidates who are employees of the General Conference and its institutions will be approved by the General Conference Executive Committee. Why was this added if the overall power to approve ordinations rested with the General Conference?

An interesting anecdote illuminating this policy is that of the ordination of Bob Folkenberg. In 1966, Folkenberg was employed by the Columbia Union, working as a singing evangelist with Roger Holley. The General Conference extended a call for Folkenberg to go to the Inter-American Division, which he accepted. Only when he and his family were ready to leave—presumably by this time off the payroll of the Columbia Union—did someone notice that he had not yet been ordained. Since it would not do to send an un-ordained man to a mission appointment, the General Conference asked the Columbia Union to approve Folkenberg's ordination and arrange for the ceremony, which hurriedly took place on Christmas Eve, 1966.

Was policy L 45 05 in effect at that time? If so, why was it not followed by having Folkenberg's ordination approved by the General Conference Executive Committee? If L 45 05 was not in effect, and the General Conference had the residual power to approve ordinations, why did it call on the union to do so?

Answers to questions like these would be easier to find if there were a complete, annotated compilation of all General Conference Executive Committee and Session actions, but such is not to be found. If such existed, it would be easier to test the facts of the occasionally heard story of a late-nineteenth century General Conference committee action requiring that ministers not be clean-shaven. Was such an action taken? Was it

ever repealed? If so, when? If not, is it still to be considered binding, even though it was never codified in the *Working Policy*? If the 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2015 votes on ordination of women are enforceable though non-codified, what else is out there in the same category?

The Secretariat document also argues that the *Working Policy* plainly prohibits the ordination of women because WB L 35, a long section entitled "Qualifications for Ordination to the Gospel Ministry," uses only the word 'man', and that such usage, rather than the more inclusive 'candidate', exhibits a clear non-gender inclusive intent. Perhaps that was the intent of the writers, but again, it does not clearly say 'women may not be ordained to the ministry.' Such an important and divisive restriction should be stated clearly, not merely by inference of intent.

Finally, Secretariat points to the exception in *Working Policy* BA 60 10.6. BA 60 is entitled "Human Relations" and BA 60 10 is entitled "Official Position," which then lists several situations where discrimination on the basis of gender, *inter alia*, is not allowed. Then BA 60 10.6 states:

Employment opportunities, membership on committees and boards, and nomination to office shall not be limited by race or color. Neither shall these opportunities be limited by gender (except those requiring ordination to the gospel ministry).*

The asterisk refers to this footnote:

**The exception clause, and any other statement above, shall not be used to reinterpret the action already taken by the world Church authorizing the ordination of women as local church elders in divisions where the division executive committees have given their approval.*

BA 60 10.6 certainly reserves the right to discriminate on the basis of gender as to candidates for ordination. It is properly read as a preservation of rights. But such a preservation of rights stops far short of clearly saying that such ordination shall not happen!

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The denomination’s authoritative documents contain no clear and unmistakable restriction on ordination as available only to men. Such a restriction should not be inferred, but must, as a matter of equity, be clearly stated. Importantly, if the General Conference administration had intended such a clear policy statement to exist, it was clearly within its power to make it so. After previous General Conference sessions refused to allow the request of the North American Division to approve women’s ordination, or to approve divisional option as to such ordination, no effort was made to include that denial of authority, much less a clearly worded policy forbidding the ordination of women, in either the *Working Policy* or the *Church Manual*. It may be argued that the language of the previous votes did not indicate a documentary policy change. Perhaps, though General Conference administrations are, and have been, experienced in the intricacies of policy change and how to word propositions so as to achieve the end desired. One may ask why this was not done. Was it because it was considered possible that such actions might be reversed by a future session? In the absence of testimony by those who made that decision, any answer must remain mere speculation.

It may also be asked why, after the history of previous session votes, the proposition was put to the delegates in San Antonio in a form that did not call for a clear policy statement forbidding or allowing the ordination of women to the ministry. Instead, the question asked concerned only allowing for divisions, which are organizationally branch offices of the General Conference, not separate entities responsible to their own constituencies, to make that decision based on the needs of their territories and the cultures therein. Read plainly, the 2015 vote applies only to the divisions, not to other levels of the church structure. The Secretariat document attempts to refute this, but only by inference and interpretation, not reference to clear worded policy.

The Secretariat document seems to say “You know what we mean, and you know what the

delegates intended, so don’t quibble.” It cites past procedure and current perception as though they were equally authoritative with the authority of the *Church Manual* and *Working Policy*. Fortunately, neither precedent nor perception equals policy. Both may be evidentiary, but neither is authoritative.

So, the unions are free to ordain women and still remain within church policy. It appears that the General Conference will not likely be content to let it rest as a matter of interpretation. But what else can it do? As it turns out, a good bit.

First, we can expect continued pressure on union administrations to submit. It was a letter from the General Conference president to the North Pacific Union president, and the circulation of the Secretariat document to all the members of the executive committee of the union that caused the cancellation of a previously announce session to further consider the ordination of women. As shown above, the ultimate authority rests with the constituency, usually exercised through the executive committee; but the committee chose to go along rather than resist.

It comes as something of a shock to many new General Conference officers and staff to discover just how little power the General Conference has to require conformity to its dictates. Its greatest—and most frequently used—power is the power of moral authority and persuasion. That’s what happened in the North Pacific Union.

But it doesn’t always work out that way. Some years ago, the same union rewrote its constitution and bylaws at the time the General Conference was trying to achieve conformity of such documents with the model constitution and bylaws contained in the *Working Policy*. Specifically, the union wanted a different method for choosing the nominating committee so as to provide more time for consideration of candidates and communicating with the delegates. The General Conference sent a delegation to use the power of persuasion to see that the models were followed in toto, but the delegates said ‘thank you for your concern, but we prefer to do it our way.’ Similar delegations more recently

failed to persuade the Pacific and Columbia Unions to forgo ordaining women. Neither has suffered demonstrable harm as a result of their decisions.

And if efforts to gain conformity by moral suasion are ineffective, what next? The General Conference has the power to call special meetings of a union constituency. At such, it could argue for a reversal of policy. It could argue that union and conference constitutions bind those entities to follow General Conference policy and procedures. As an example, the bylaws of one typical conference provide that "All purposes, policies and procedures of this conference shall be in harmony with the working policies of the North American Division and the General Conference. The Conference shall pursue the mission of the Church in harmony with the doctrines, programs, and initiatives adopted and approved by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in its sessions." But, importantly, the last three words constitute a most important qualifier to what goes before: the conference is bound only by those policies approved at a General Conference *session*—the *Church Manual* and *Working Policy*.

If unions refuse all such efforts by the General Conference, there remains one final solution—a 'nuclear option.' *Working Policy* B 95 15 details the procedure for the dissolution and/or expulsion of a union. It provides that when, in the opinion of a division administration, a union is found to be in apostasy or rebellion, certain steps shall be taken. First, the division committee makes the determination of apostasy or rebellion. Next, the division shall refer the matter to the General Conference Executive Committee with a recommendation for expulsion. Third, the General Conference Executive Committee must decide whether to call another union constituency meeting. Finally, the General Conference Executive Committee shall consider the recommendation of the division at a Spring Meeting or Annual Council. If the committee approves the recommendation at such a meeting, it shall refer

the recommendation to the next regular or specially called General Conference Session.

The procedure outlined in B 95 15 is indeed a 'nuclear option.' To even consider it brings to mind visions of a circular firing squad—a self-defeating process that results in injury all around. It is difficult to foresee circumstances that would even arguably require such.

Other questions remain. What of those already ordained—in China, the Columbia and Pacific Unions, the Netherlands Union? Is their ordination to be annulled, their credentials revoked? Such action is usually reserved only for those guilty of transgressions of great moral turpitude. Various levels of the church structure have been known to pass off employees guilty of such transgressions as theft, spousal and/or child abuse to another organization, rather than face a public spectacle. How can we, with a straight face, argue that the credentials and ordination of women who are guilty of nothing more than finding themselves in the middle of a muddle, should be revoked in the face of such gross past inconsistency?

The General Conference has a vested interest in arguing for an expansive interpretation of its powers. The unions, in turn, have a similar interest in arguing for an expansive view of their authority. Who is to decide? Perhaps it is time to reconsider our lack of an independent judiciary. In the meantime, we can only hope that calm, settled reason will trump fundamentalist fervor. ■

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Reflecting on San Antonio: Or, Hermeneutics or Humility or What's the Bible Really Got to Do With It | BY HEROLD WEISS

**Mercy can
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Several observers have said lately that the Adventist Church is in crisis. The diagnosis is related to several factors. Some see the main issue to be the wilting of small congregations in the United States. Others see the exodus of the young who are educated beyond high school, even in Adventist colleges and universities. Still others point to the abandonment of traditional Adventist behaviors like abstention from Coca-Cola, coffee, tea, beer and wine, attendance at movie theatres and Sabbath shopping. I guess that it is in reference to these practices that the General Conference President, Ted Wilson, calls for revival and reformation. Besides, the issue of women's ordination as pastors, something that has been on the front burner for over twenty years, is seen as a possible sufficient cause for a split in the denomination.

In preparation for the recently held General Conference Session, a large committee studied the ordination issue for over a year. It is my suspicion that the members of the committee who were in favor of women's ordination determined that the chances for a favorable vote at the General Conference Session in San Antonio were minimal. On that account, they were instrumental in recommending that the question to be decided was not whether or not women could be ordained, but whether or not to authorize the Divisions of the General Conference to determine whether or not to ordain women in their territories. I was given to understand by some members of the study committee that as such the recommendation of the study committee would pass. Well, to the great disappointment of many, the recommendation of the study committee was

voted down. In this way the delegates to the General Conference Session at San Antonio demonstrated that the church is not only against the ordination of women; it is also against tolerance. Tolerance makes one understand that not all human beings have the same cultural and historical background and, therefore, allows diversity. Tolerance is the virtue that makes it possible for unity not to be dependent on uniformity. Intolerance is the hallmark of an insecure organization on the defensive.

The San Antonio General Conference Session will also go down in history for its revision of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. The promulgation of these clumsy, over-wordy "beliefs" at the 1980 General Conference Session in Dallas only revealed the siege mentality dominating the church's hierarchy then. Their further elaboration at San Antonio thirty-five years later demonstrates that the ecclesiastical authorities are still dominated by a reactionary mindset. The announcement that a committee will be formed to study the proper hermeneutical method to be used by Adventists is further proof, if such were still needed, that the leadership of the church suffers from a profound lack of vision. It is ironic that the church that began its life as a movement bringing about liberation from the tyranny of dogmas and creeds, and that formulated its message by an unfettered and original study of the Scriptures, is now trying to find security by controlling how the Bible is to be studied, thus ensuring that its study can only prove what the church has proclaimed to be fundamental beliefs by which church employees will be judged. This development will only serve to promote inquisi-

tors within the membership.

Actually, the crisis of the Adventist church has been percolating for some time and it is related to the study of the Bible. Ever since the educational institutions of the church raised the educational standards of the membership, the reading of the Bible to search for text with which to construct doctrines has been seen as artificial by those members with intellectual curiosity. The academic study of nature, history and literature teaches new ways to approach and evaluate evidence. This phenomenon had been taking place in Protestantism ever since the study of the past developed criteria with which to test its results. At issue has been the question of origins: the origin of the universe in which humans live, the origin of the relationship between Israel and Yahve, the origin of the Bible. For believers, all these revolve around the origin of the Bible. Some insist that its author is God and that, therefore, it reveals God's mind. Others insist that its authors were human beings under inspiration who wrote within the confines of their mental powers and their world of meaning.

Those maintaining God's authorship pick here and there freely because God is consistent and never changes his mind. They still search for texts with which to build doctrinal constructs. For them, taking texts from the Bible as the last word on any subject is the only way to recognize its authority. This way of seeing the question has been taken to the extreme of proposing that believers must envision the universe in which we live as it is described in the Bible. Fernando Canale, as professor of Systematic Theology at the Seminary, insisted on the necessity to adopt the "biblical worldview" as an essential requirement for Adventists. According to him, "a deliberate search for, and adoption of, the biblical worldview is a necessary condition for . . . Christian unity [which] is a unity not only in action but also in mind and thought. . . . The biblical worldview becomes the indispensable tool for grounding the internal unity of the global church."¹

Such a point of view is difficult to take seriously because it makes a travesty of the Bible.

Which of the various cosmological worldviews presented by different biblical authors is to be adopted? The worldview of Genesis 1 where God is distant, omniscient and omnipotent and man is God's "image" within creation? The worldview of Genesis 2 where God has to fumble looking for what will work, gets dirty working with mud, and man turns out to be disobedient? The worldview of Paul who ascended to the third heaven and saw there things which he cannot reveal? The Stoic worldview of the author of *To the Hebrews* who expects this world to be shaken so that the hypostatic world may be revealed? Or, the worldview of John the theologian who thinks that there is a furnace with a shaft from which smoke escapes when the key to open the abyss is used? Of course, all these descriptions are to be read *literally*.

Those who insist that the Bible was written by inspired human beings read the books of the Bible for what their authors were arguing about and discover that the authors reveal different worldviews and sometimes less than morally commendable views. For them, the authority of the Bible is to be seen in the faith its authors confess, even if at times its expression is limited by the circumstances in which they lived. Those who see God as the author of the Bible, and give to its words absolute eternal authority, describe its authority and inspiration with abstract concepts that are connected only tangentially with the contents of the Bible. Those who see human beings expressing their life of faith in the Bible describe its authority and inspiration on the basis of what they read in the Bible.

Are we expected to believe that God takes pleasure in smashing on the rocks the children of the enemies of Israel? (Ps. 137:9). How can we forget that God commands that homosexuals cannot enter the temple (Deut. 23:17), and that anyone engaging in homosexual activity is to be put to death? (Lev. 20:10). Of course, anyone caught working on the Sabbath should also be put to death (Exod. 31:15). Let us be obedient to the command that the firstborn must be sacrificed to the Lord (Exod. 22:28). Well, not really,

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because the Lord changed his mind about that one (Mic. 6:7). Besides, there is another law proposing that, rather than offering the sacrifice, one was to *redeem* the firstborn paying the stipulated price at the temple (Exod. 34:20). Ezekiel evaluates the original law and decides that it was among God's "bad statutes" (Ezek. 20:25, 26). Jeremiah, on the other hand, insists that God did not command such things at all. In fact, such a thought had never even entered God's mind (Jer. 19:5, 6). Were all these understandings of what to do with the firstborn written by God?

On what basis do we neglect to obey the command that if your eye or your hand causes you to sin you must cut it off? (Mark 9:47; Matt. 5:29). Which commandment are we to obey? The one in the Law of Moses allowing a man to divorce his wife because she no longer "finds favor in his eyes" (Deut. 24:1); the one from Jesus saying that divorce is forbidden, period (Mark 10:2–12); the one in the gospel *According to Matthew*, allowing a man to divorce his wife if she commits adultery (Matt. 5:31; 19:7)? Paul knows Jesus' prohibition of divorce but, as one working among Gentiles, he found it necessary to issue his own exception to the rule; he allows it if an unbelieving spouse initiates it (1 Cor. 7:15). Apparently it has been unofficially decided that only the one issued by Moses is to be followed, with the understanding that the wife can also initiate it if her husband does not find favor in her eyes.

One of the ways by which to understand the Old Testament is to see it as the record of the centuries-long struggle of the Israelites to become a nation of monotheists. Through its pages there are continuous references to the idolatrous tendencies of the people. Several chapters in Isaiah deal with the need to recognize that Yahve is the only true God and that the other gods are just idols. They are pieces of wood which can be used for different purposes. Idolaters shamefully bow themselves before them and worship them. In these chapters the question is repeatedly asked, "To whom then will you liken God?" (Isa. 40:18), "To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One" (Isa. 40:45), "To whom will you liken me and make me equal, to compare me, that we may be alike? (Isa. 46:5). The answer to the question is obvious. None other can do the things that are listed as done by God. One of these is brought out repeatedly; God is the only one who can foretell what will happen tomorrow. What God says about the future is proven by future events (Isa. 41:21–24; 42:9; 44:6–8; 46:8–10). God's prophecies

are always fulfilled. An anonymous theologian of ancient Israel disagreed. He told the story of the prophet Jonah to point out that Yahve is not bound by prophecies. The future is in God's hands and those who think they know the future because of a prophecy may find themselves like Jonah completely frustrated. God does carry out his purposes, but those who pretend to know how God will do it forget that God is the only being who is absolutely free. Mercy can only be exercised by those who are free.

Maybe it is possible to construct an argument defending the full authority of God behind all these statements. Maybe someone can harmonize all these statements. There are those who would point out that the Bible must be interpreted with humility. Is it really a question of hermeneutics, or of humility? It is obvious that the authors of the Bible did not take dictation. They were not setting down the view from the top. They were participating in a faith journey with the Lord, and they were expressing the life of faith with the language and the mores of their own cultures. Later Bible writers, on the basis of their life of faith in their own cultures and also under inspiration, judged previous expressions of the faith inadequate.

It is quite evident that the whole of Deuteronomy proclaims the necessity of keeping the commandments as the requirement for living happily and prosperously in the Land. It affirms that righteousness is to be attained through the law: "And it shall be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us" (Deut. 6:25). God and the people are bound by a covenant: "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations and requites to their face those who hate him, by destroying them; he will not be slack with him who hates him, he will requite him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandments, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which I command you this day" (Deut. 7:9–11). In Leviticus the situation is perfectly clear: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live" (Lev. 18:5). However, when Habakkuk wondered how could it be that in God's world sinful Israel was being sent into exile, and idolatrous and murderous Babylon was rewarded with the spoils of Jerusalem, he was told, "Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by

faith" (Hab. 2:4). Paul takes Habakkuk's declaration as his basic text and declares that no one will be justified by living under the law. According to Paul, Israel should have known all along that obedience to the law did not give life. Habakkuk had it right. Paul acknowledges that Moses said that "the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live" (Rom. 10:5), but then denies it by pointing out that Israel failed to obtain righteousness because it "did not pursue it through faith but as if it were based on works" (Rom. 9:32). Can anyone reading the Bible carefully come to the conclusion that God is its author?

Affirming that God is the author of the Bible, which was quite in evidence at the discussions that brought about the revision of the fundamental beliefs at the General Conference Session in San Antonio, has been taken for granted by Christians over the centuries. It is, in this connection, quite revealing that when Paul refers to the declaration that life depends on obedience to the commandments, he does not say "God writes that," but rather says "Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it" (Rom. 10:5). The context is a developed argument to prove Moses wrong.

The god of the Psalmist, who prayed to his god to smash the children of his enemies on the rocks, is not my God. He thought his god would do that for him. I think my God could not possibly do that for anyone. I know that not because I read it in the law; I know that not because I read it in the Bible; I know that because my mind, renewed by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:2), tells me so. The Gospel, as Paul says, is power to live as a new creation in the Risen Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, however, does not make me an irrational being. It enlightens me into the love and the righteousness of God as I critically read the Bible. That the world is full of people who live according to the passions of the world does not deny that the world is also full of people who are empowered by the Spirit to enact God's love and righteousness in this world. It is in the lives of these people that the truth and the

authority of the Bible is revealed.

The positing of God as the author of the Bible in order to give authority to one's own interpretation of it received a shot in the arm by Gerhard Hasel, when he was the Dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. In his *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), he wrote, "Scripture issues from God who therefore is the Author of the Bible" (100). His many students apparently have been promoting his views. One thing is to assume that God is the author of Scripture in the abstract, unaware of any second thoughts about it. In most worship services throughout Christendom, at the conclusion of the Scripture readings the readers proclaim, "This is the Word of the Lord." This declaration conforms to the understanding that the Word of the Lord is an oral word. The Word of God is to be heard. Worshippers understand that the Word of the Lord is to be interpreted by the prophet that will explore it in the following sermon. In this way the worship service has been an encounter with the oral Word of the Lord.

It is something quite different to state in a polemical context that the Bible is "the written word of God," as the first of the Fundamental Beliefs defensively proclaims. In this connection, one cannot but notice the lack of vision of those who formulated the Fundamental Beliefs and decided that one had to affirm belief in an *infallible* Bible before one could believe in God. Can there be a more blatant confusion of priorities? The reactionary idolatry of the Bible is the most lamentable development in the present crisis of the Adventist church.

Those who consider the Bible to be the written word of God impose on its stories an anachronistic literal historicity and scientific accuracy. Such total lack of understanding of what modern science and history are about renders irrelevant whatever else these defenders of God's authority may say. Historians recognize that any telling of the past, or of the present, is conditioned by the subjective agenda of its author. Rather than granting accuracy to ancient

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writers, they reconstruct the historical settings and the symbolic universes of these writers, whether inspired or not, so as to understand them in their own terms. To give historical or scientific credit to those who wrote unaware of historical or scientific canons is anachronistic and, at face value, unbelievable. Besides, those wishing to give historical and scientific value to what supposedly God wrote fail miserably in their efforts because they give such value capriciously to some texts and not to others. The test of any method of interpretation is its ability to function consistently.

Defenders of the notion that God is the author of the Bible and therefore it is the last word on any subject apparently want to have their cake and also eat it. On the one hand they claim that the Bible has historical and scientific authority. On the other they claim that it is beyond any critical evaluation. But that is precisely the hallmark of modern science and history. What any scientist or historian says is immediately considered critically by peers. All their statements are open to critical review by anybody. This is the case when the issue is considered from the point of view of science and history. If we look at it from the point of view of the Bible, to place the Bible beyond any critical judgment is to overlook that biblical authors used their critical judgment on previous biblical authors, as I have been pointing out.

If the Bible is to remain at all relevant in the twenty-first century, its relevance cannot be imposed by authoritarian proclamations of God as its author. The word *authority* derives from the word *author*. An author is not just a writer. An author is one whose writings are recognized by readers who determine that what they are reading says something that makes sense and is significant. Authors cannot impose their authority. They are given authority by readers who gain insights into reality from them. The authority of the Bible cannot be established by declarations that its author is God. Its authority comes from the readers who find in its pages insights that give their lives new significance as they are confronted by the Spirit that inspired the writers of the Bible. As the leaders of the Protestant Reformation well understood, the Bible is the Word of God when the Spirit that inspired its writers inspires its readers. As pages with ink signs on them, Bibles are just books.

Those who claim to know God's mind appeal to their Bibles, and those who know the Holy Spirit that moves human spirits in mysterious ways to lead their journeys of faith also appeal to their Bibles. It is easy to diagnose the crisis in Adventism. It is the standoff between these two

postures toward the Bible. It is more difficult to find a resolution to this confrontation. My suggestion is to take the advice Paul gave to the Christians at Rome who were having heated disputes about proper diet and the observance of the Sabbath. Paul knows that as a result of these disputes some judged the others as sinners, and these responded by despising their judges. Paul reminds everyone that they will have to stand before the judgment seat of God and that, therefore, it is essential to be true to one's faith, that is to one's determination that God is faithful and requires commitment. Sin is what is done without reference to one's faith. Because the classification of clean and unclean meats is real in the realm of knowledge and not in the realm of being, sin is not to be defined in the realm of knowledge. Of course, Paul could bring into the discussion the distinction between the realm of being and the realm of knowledge because he had the benefits of a good Hellenistic education, something that was not available to the ancient Hebrews. On the basis of this cultural development he declared all meats clean. On account of this understanding of sin, he advised the Romans who had "disputes over opinions," "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." In effect, Paul tells the Romans that their judging and despising are uncalled for because these actions deal with definitions of sin that overlook the way things are. His advice is to live by faith knowing that you will be judged by God. Sin, like faith, is in the realm of being.

Would that the crisis in Adventism were solved by the relocation of priorities. That the Bible is "the written word of God" is not the number one Fundamental Belief in the realm of being. The number one Fundamental Belief is that I live by faith in the promise of God and therefore I abound in hope. ■

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